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ABSTRACT

Literacy being a major concern at state level preconferences, a theme conference was held to develop recommendations as to how libraries, in cooperation with other concerned agencies, can work toward solving the continuing problems of illiteracy in the U.S. Approximately 200 participants representing the library and educational communities, the government, business, and the private sector, were divided into eight discussion groups and generated 16 recommendations. This report includes a brief review of the background, the six basic tenets which provided the conceptual framework for consideration of literacy problems in relation to libraries, and a summary of the recommendations--nine for the federal level, two each for the private sector and the state level, and three for the local level. (SW)

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LIBRARIES AND LITERACY

A Theme Conference Summary

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White House Conference on Library and Information Services

Pre-Conference Meeting on Special Themes

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Libraries and Literacy
A Summary Report

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FOREWORD

The Theme Conference on Libraries and Literacy was made possible in part by general support from the National Institute for Education, with speakers and special papers funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Conference staff was provided by the White House Conference. Coordinator for the conference was Jean-Anne South, assisted by Janet Smalley. General meetings were chaired by Charles Benton, chairman of NCLIS, and also chairman of the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

PREFACE

The recurrence of literacy as an important issue in pre-Conference statelevel meetings brought about the theme conference on libraries and literacy held in Reston, Virginia in April 1979. Approximately 200 representatives from the library and educational communities and from government, business, and the private sector met to develop recommendations as to how libraries, in cooperation with other concerned agencies, can work toward solving the continuing problems of illiteracy in the United States. Conferees were divided into eight groups and produced the recommendations summarized in this report.

INTRODUCTION

> Literacy is vital to the welfare of the country and to the development and fulfillment of its citizens; libraries are vital to a literate people.
>
> -- Robert Wedgeworth
> Executive Director
> American Library Association

Historically, the push toward universal literacy in the United States has had a strong association with mainstream cultural values -- the need to produce good citizens capable of meeting their social and economic responsibilities. It becomes increasingly clear, however, that our educational system has failed to provide many of our citizens with even the minimum functional literacy skills that men and women need to meet the daily demands of a modern industrial society.

According to the Bureau of the Census,[1] trends in educational attainment (years of school completed) have shown continued improvement over the past decade, but nearly 20 percent of the adult population in the United States demonstrates "severely limited functional competence" on standardized educational achievement tests.

The Adult Performance Level Programs of the University of Texas, using a formula involving income, educational attainment, and job status, estimated that 22 percent of the national adult population is functionally illiterate. This means that 37 million adults cannot complete an application for a driver's license, comparision shop for value, or read at the fifth grade level that is used in most official announcements or forms. It is estimated that two-thirds of all Americans require help with tax forms.

In 1977, a survey conducted among young Americans by the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that 13 percent of all 17-year olds are functionally illiterate. An estimated half a million functionally illiterate persons graduate from high school every year: one out of every five high school seniors cannot do basic everyday reading tasks upon graduation. Taxpayers support an $80 billion a year educational system that graduates a large number of functionally illiterate adults.

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1 Information included here was taken from "Conference on Libraries and Literacy Fact Sheet," furnished by the White House Conference on Library and Information Services.

Between 1963 and 1977, verbal scores on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) declined 49 points on a scale of 200 to 800 points, indicating a drop in reading ability; in other words, one out of every four incoming college freshman needs remedial help in reading and writing.

Literacy rates continue to fall in the United States, Americans now rank behind both the Soviet Union and Western European countries in literacy rates. The private, cultural, and economic lives of millions of Americans are severely limited, impoverished, and frustrated. Despite its increasing prevalence among all strata of society, however, illiteracy in the United States today still remains disproportionately a problem of the poor, the nonwhite, and the immigrant.

Academic libraries, school libraries/media centers, public libraries, and special libraries have all traditionally supported the needs of those of their specific clientele, at all ages, who have the level of literacy necessary to use their services. They have supplied both needed information or informational materials and materials for personal enrichment and intellectual liberation. These libraries have been of particular importance to the highly literate, who turn naturally to them for information to solve problems, to do their jobs, and to enjoy life.

Current thinking on the roles of libraries, and particularly the roles of public libraries, has highlighted the need for serving a broadened spectrum of community members -- to serve well also those who lack or have minimal literacy skills. To define literacy in relation to libraries it is important that the full range of literacy needs in a community be considered.

This concept of public library responsibility for service to the functionally illiterate was formally adopted by the Public Library Association in January 1978 in a statement prepared by the Alternative Education Program Section:

> One of the significant roles of the public library, as an educational institution, is service to the functionally illiterate. Since those who are functionally illiterate are part of the total service community, the public library has the obligation to provide programs, materials, and services designed to assist these individuals to attain their desired educational goals.
>
> A further responsibility for the public library is to seek and identify those community agencies wth whom cooperative and coordinative programs may be established to provide viable alternative educational opportunities for the functionally illiterate.

As cooperators in an interagency attack on the problems of illiteracy, all libraries, but particularly public libraries, can make several unique contributions to the delivery of basic literacy services for adults. To a tradition of one-to-one service and a nonthreatening environment for those with histories of failure in formal educational settings, libraries add handy locations and extended hours for the convenience of program users. With properly developed collections, the library is also able to provide continuing service to improve the reading abilities of both the newly literate and those who are further along the literacy continuum.

Responsibility for providing services to all members of the community makes the public library a natural intersection of community interests, providing the potential for coordination and the opportunity for leadership in the development of community literacy programs.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The following basic tenets provided the conceptual framework applied to the consideration of literacy problems in relation to libraries:

-- A democratic, technological society requires an informed citizenry; all citizens have a right and a responsibility to develop functional literacy skills.

-- It is the responsibility of our society to provide all citizens with the human and material resources necessary to acquire that level of literacy that will enable each to live an effective, productive, and satisfying life.

-- Although literacy should be seen as a basic human right and as an end in itself, it is unlikely that illiteracy can be attacked independently of other social problems.

-- Developing a successful literacy program requires planning for a variety of methods and approaches and the cooperation of a variety of agencies. Libraries have a major responsibility in this planning and can play a variety of roles in contributing to the delivery of community literacy services.

-- Some reordering of library priorities will be necessary if libraries are to make a substantial contribution to new literacy programs. The current tightening or decline in library budgets, however, makes such a contribution unlikely without new funding for this purpose.

-- A successful literacy program will require the development of public and professional awareness of the need for action to improve literacy, the coordination of efforts of all agencies involved, and adequate funding to support the development of model projects and training in the variety of techniques necessary to implement literacy projects.

Recommendations for the Federal Level

Although a variety of sources suggest the dimensions of illiteracy in the United States, there is no single authoritative measure of its prevalence. The need for some measurement of the scope of illiteracy in the United States was discussed by most work groups, with the Census Bureau suggested as the possible agency for collecting the data. Considerations of the difficulties inherent in collecting meaningful literacy data (related to performance levels

rather than to years of school completed) resulted in only one recommendation concerning such data collection. The need for realistic appraisal of the scope of total and functional illiteracy, however, remains.

Recommendation 1. The Census Bureau should ascertain, as soon as possible, the number of functional illiterates in the United States.

Only one work group did not address the need for leadership, planning, coordination, or services at the national level. Four alternatives for providing leadership and support for a nationwide attack on illiteracy emerged. Three of these alternatives sought direct Federal Government leadership; the fourth looked to the private sector for coordination of literacy programs, turning to Federal agencies only for some support and advice. The alternatives for national leadership called for:

-- establishment of the proposed National Commission on Literacy,

-- leadership from existing Federal agencies with a responsibility for literacy and literacy programs,

-- establishment of a national program for libraries and literacy, which would coordinate State and Federal efforts, and

-- establishment of a broadly supported national center for the study of literacy, which would be advised by the National Commission on Literacy.

During the theme conference, an announcement was made that legislation was being introduced in the U.S. Congress to establish a National Commission on Literacy (Senate Joint Resolution 70). Support of this concept was not universal, but five of the eight work groups specifically endorsed it and made recommendations concerning its organization and the tasks it should perform. One work group recommended leadership through coordination by appropriate Federal agencies having existing literacy programs. Another work group supported the establishment of a National Program for Libraries and Literacy that would not be identified with the pending legislation.

Recommendation 2. A National Commission on Literacy should be established, composed of representatives of public and private organizations and professional disciplines concerned wth literacy in the United States. Representatives of all types of libraries should be included in this representation. The Commission should:

-- define various levels of literacy and their functional applications and establish minimum levels of functional literacy for basic reading, writing, viewing, listening, and computation,

-- study the clarity and effectiveness of the communication of print media available in the United States and develop standards for written language and procedures for meeting these standards,

-- research and identify the most effective methods for teaching basic skills to different age groups, in and out of public schools,

-- review and catalog competencies needed by paid and volunteer instructors of basic skills and recommend standards for preservice and inservice staff development,

-- prepare guidelines defining the role of libraries in the delivery of basic literacy skills education, including identification of the types of individuals or demographic groups best served by library literacy programs,

-- make recommendations for legislation to define the responsibilities of Federal agencies and to promote cooperation and coordination with Government and non-Government agencies in the planning and evaluation of basic skills programs and the sharing of staff, materials, facilities, technical assistance, and funding, and

-- establish a task force, including representatives from library and education groups, to advise publishers on the development of relevant print and nonprint materials for illiterates, basic skills education, and new literates.

Recomendation 3. Appropriate Federal agencies should have a leadership role in supporting and coordinating literacy programs. These agencies include: the Office of Education (Office of Library and Learning Resources, and Right to Read Office); NCLIS; and the National Institute of Education.

Recommendation 4. A national program for libraries and literacy should be created to coordinate, through State library agencies, support, training, and technical assistance for literacy programs initiated by individual libraries.

In addition to endorsing the legislation for creation of a National Commission on Literacy, various other recommendations concerning legislation and funding were made by all of the work groups. Funding recommendations included both modifications to existing funding legislation for libraries and educational institutions and new funding proposals.

Recommendation 5. The Federal Government should provide an expanded funding program to support research, development, demonstration, and training projects that will help libraries to utilize more fully the new information processing and learning technologies, which may aid in combating illiteracy.

Recommendation 6. A national qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the roles, procedures, effectiveness, and consequences of library literacy programs/services should be developed to inform those who make national policy and funding decisions related to such programs/services.

Recommendation 7. Current Federal legislation concerning educational institutions and libraries should be reviewed to ensure specific inclusion of literacy programs and to ensure that libraries and other agencies develop comprehensive, cooperative literacy programs. Amendments to current legislation should include the following items.

-- Public libraries should be designated as local alternative education agencies in all education legislation, so that they will be eligible for additional categories of existing funding programs.

-- The Higher Education Act should be amended to include funds for the development of literacy programs in academic libraries and media centers, particularly in community colleges.

-- The Vocational Education Act should be amended to place a high priority on lifelong learning centers, designating libraries as potential agencies for administering and/or implementing such programs.

-- Literacy projects should be given high priority in the funding of the Library Services and Construction Act, with continuing operating funds provided to libraries for such projects.

-- Federal legislation for school library programs should include funding for the development of literacy skills in elementary and secondary education.

Recommendation 8. Legislation should be developed that will: mandate public library service to agencies and/or daycare centers that serve preschool children and their parents; and strengthen the role of libraries in educating the functionally illiterate.

Recommendation 9. New Federal funding should specifically support the attack on illiteracy. This funding should include money for:

-- Research that will develop and compare approaches and techniques for inculcating basic literacy skills.

-- Support of new and existing literacy programs.

-- Education and training of librarians and other personnel developing literacy programs. Literacy-oriented preservice and continuing education for professionals should include: development of awareness of the importance of literacy programs; methods for developing community outreach efforts; selection and acquisition of print materials for beginning adult readers; selection and use of nonprint materials in serving illiterates and new literates; and coordination of community literacy efforts.

-- Support and training for the teaching of illiterates by volunteer literacy organizations in library settings.

-- Support for the development and publication of adequate teaching and reading materials at the needed levels.

Recommendations for the Private Sector

Recommendation 10. With the advice of the National Commission on Literacy, and using both public and private resources, a national center for the study of literacy should be established to coordinate efforts of schools, libraries, and other public and private agencies to eradicate illiteracy. The center should promote improvements in literacy by:

-- developing greater public awareness of the need for improved literacy,

-- devising ways to identify and to serve illiterate individuals and groups,

-- fostering research and the development of literacy programs,

-- serving as an information clearinghouse and dissemination agency for all research in literacy,

-- promoting interagency cooperation, and

-- encouraging the development of local policy, responsibility, resources, and support of literacy programs.

Recommendation 11. Commercial television networks should:

-- provide basic programs of instruction in beginning reading and writing for adults,

-- work toward the development, through scripts of regular programs such as soap operas, a public awareness of and sensitivity toward literacy problems, and

-- cooperate with schools and libraries in making pertinent program scripts available for off-air use in connection with the development or improvement of literacy skills.

Recommendations for the State Level

Recommendation 12. State governments should give a high priority to the establishment and funding of statewide literacy programs. Libraries should be specifically designated among primary agencies for developing and implementing adult basic education programs.

Recommendation 13. State library agencies should work toward implementation of national literacy plans by:

-- developing cooperation with existing volunteer literacy programs,

-- gathering and disseminating information about literacy programs and materials,

-- generating public information strategies for State and local use,

-- helping to organize literacy programs in libraries,

-- including funding of literacy programs in allocations of Federal and State monies,

-- developing a program for training librarians, other professionals, and volunteers for work with illiterates, and

-- assuming responsibility for the implementation of models for serving illiterates and the newly literate by reordering library priorities, by program and collection development, and by merchandising library services.

Recommendations for the Local Level

Recommendation 14. Funding support of school and library literacy programs should have a high priority in the local distribution of Federal revenue-sharing funds.

Recommendaton 15. The public library should serve as the responsible agency for ensuring the opportunity for reading instruction for the illiterate adult, either through referral or direct assistance. To accomplish this role, public libraries should:

-- provide leadership in the coordination of literacy services to the adult community;

-- work with school libraries and other pertinent public and private agencies in assessing the literacy needs of the community and the resources available for improving literacy levels; on the basis of this assessment, initiate the development of an interagency master plan (where one does not already exist) for improving community literacy levels;

-- publicize literacy programs and materials and availability of nonprint materials in order to encourage use by community members not being served now;

-- develop a local literacy collection from national, State, and local sources to support the related information needs of all community literacy workers; ensure adequate dissemination of the information gathered;

-- ensure the availability of instructional programs in nonthreatening environments, at times and locations convenient for the individual learner;

-- coordinate volunteer literacy programs and training for volunteer tutors;

-- provide technical assistance and materials to other agencies offering literacy services or programs;

-- explore the possibilities of alternatives in the delivery of literacy services, such as the coordination

of local television, radio, or cassette instruction programs with associated print materials; and

-- develop procedures for the continuing evaluation of literacy programs to ensure that each citizen has access to information resources and services.

Recommendation 16. All types of libraries should be active and continuing agents in the promotion of literacy at all levels and for all people. Appropriate library literacy services include:

-- identification and referral of individual learners to appropriate resources and/or basic skills instruction,

-- hosting instructional programs at multiple-learning levels,

-- developing skills for assisting the non-English speaking citizens in the community,

-- training staff, acquiring materials, designing programs, and publicizing services for the adult new reader,

-- developing supplementary programs for children and young adults with the coordination of librarians and teachers, and encouraging parental involvement in reading development from the preschool level on,

-- providing print materials, both for reading and for instruction in reading, and nonprint materials for all literacy levels, but with attention to their potentials for use by nonreaders, and

-- fostering visual literacy among all citizens.